

# Deal aids hard-hit Bay-Delta system

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STAFF WRITER

SACRAMENTO — State and federal officials Thursday unveiled a historic plan to restore water quality and endangered fish populations to the battered Bay-Delta ecosystem, and provide a reliable source of water to cities and farms.

Although the two sides often found themselves at odds over how much water should be dedicated to the environment, Gov. Pete Wilson, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and U.S. EPA administrator Carol Browner were on the same page as they outlined the details of the landmark agreement at the state Capitol.

Even environmentalists and farmers cautiously hailed the plan as one they could live with — mainly because it removes the uncertainty surrounding their future water supplies, while defining environmental standards that must be met to boost fish populations.

"There's a definite improvement over the original proposal (put forth by farming and urban agencies)," said David Behar, executive director of The Bay Institute.

"In general, now that we see it, we had to swallow hard to sign this agreement," said Behar, "but the improvements in the short run are good enough, and the consensus was historic enough that we felt it was worth signing..."

The Delta provides critical habitats for more than 100 species of fish and acts as a mixing zone for salt water from San Francisco Bay and freshwater from the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers.

But years of freshwater diversions to supply farms and cities have increased salinity in critical fish rearing areas.

As a result, fish are forced upstream and can get trapped at pumping plants, and eggs die.

And the quality of water supplied to customers whose water districts

take supplies nearest the salty estuaries was going from bad to worse.

Under the landmark agreement, cities and farmers will sacrifice a total of about 10 percent — or 400,000 acre-feet — of water they divert in a normal year to protect endangered fish species in the Bay-Delta estuary.

That figure will jump to 1.1 million acre-feet in critically dry years.

Behar said he is concerned about how much of that 1.1 million will be supplied by users who get their water from the federal Central Valley Project.

Those users have already had to cut back diversions to double fish populations as a result of the Endangered Species Act, and it isn't clear how that will fit in with the new Bay-Delta standards.

State and federal agencies, as well as agriculture and urban water users and environmentalists, worked furiously on the compromise plan. It is the first time since 1978 that new Bay-Delta standards have been approved.

The EPA was forced by lawsuits to devise standards to protect the deteriorating estuary because the state had failed. But the federal agency agreed to withdraw its standards once a new state plan is approved early next year.

To protect the fish nursery of Suisun Bay, a salinity limit of 2 parts per thousand must be maintained from February through June.

To accomplish that, three salinity measurement stations will be installed in critical rearing areas near Roe Island and Chipps Island in Suisun Bay and Collinsville Island near the mouth of the Sacramento River.

To protect migrating juvenile fall-run chinook salmon from April to June, temperature, river flows, diversion rates and channel diversions will be controlled in the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers.

Salinity standards on the lower San Joaquin River have also been set to ensure upstream migration and survival of eggs.

The plan is supposed to provide enough protection for all endangered species, and it includes a commitment to refrain from listing any other species as endangered for the next three years, a component

that farmers saw as a key ingredient. If a species requires more water, the federal government will have to provide it, not the water users.

"Before the ESA was a black box that could only be looked at by fisheries. And nobody could understand how they came out with their biological opinions.... Now, every one is privy to that information," said Stephen Hall, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies.

But people have not been on the same side of the fence for very long, and there's still a degree of uncertainty on all sides.

Tracy walnut farmer Jim McLeod has been a longtime critic of environmentalists throughout the negotiations over Delta standards. Even so, he's glad to see some kind of agreement in place.

"The best thing about this agreement is that we have an agreement, and we've got to give it try," he said. "In the end, we've always looked to the farmer to solve California's water problems. It's hard to see that ever changing."

Initially, the cutbacks will come from users who get their water from the state and federal water projects, the majority of whom are farmers. Once the state standards are approved by the EPA next year, the State Water Resources Control Board will begin to apportion the cutbacks to include local water users such as the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

But the users say it's an agreement they can live with to ensure reliable supplies.

"From our perspective, it provides a modest improvement to the quality of water we draw from the Delta," said Al Donner, director of Public Information and Conservation for the Contra Costa Water District. "We are the last agency that draws before it goes to the Bay — our intake is by Oakley, so we're first affected by salt coming in."

As part of the accord, the Metropolitan Water District agreed to fund \$10 million a year for the three years of the agreement to help halt other sources of fishery declines, such as unscreened pumps.

Tracy Bureau staff writer Scott Howard contributed to this report.